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SUBJECT: U.S., U.K., FRENCH AND GERMAN AMBASSADORS DISCUSS
SAUDI RECONCILIATION TALKS

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. On October 9, French Ambassador Jean de Ponton d'Amecourt met with U.S., British and German Ambassadors to discuss his October 6 briefing by President Karzai on the recent reconciliation meetings in Saudi Arabia.

The Ambassadors agreed that the publicity and lack of clarity surrounding the Saudi talks may indicate this is at best an embryonic reconciliation effort. The French Ambassador implied his government is leaning forward on this issue, adding that points drawn from this discussion would strengthen his guidance to Paris to approach the Saudi process with caution and skepticism.

KARZAI BRIEFING TO FRENCH AMBASSADOR ON SAUDI TALKS

12. (C) Karzai told the French Ambassador the Afghan delegation to Saudi Arabia was led by his brother Qayum, former Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid and Abdullah Anas. (Anas has been working on this initiative for the past year.)

On the Saudi side, Dr. Mansour, advisor to King Abdullah, and Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, Saudi Intelligence Chief, were the point men. Karzai was quick to point out that the officials on the respective delegations were not the key interlocutors in the Saudi talks. Instead, a "group of mullahs" (both pro- and anti-government) were chosen to engage in talks with other mullahs and "Islamic scholars associated with the mujahideen." Karzai emphasized the key potential role of Saudi clerics: "If I ask these mullahs to travel a difficult stony path, there would be little obedience, but if a Saudi mullah asks them, they will go, no question." The timing of the meetings had been planned to generate minimum notice; many of those who participated did so while traveling to Saudi Arabia as part of a traditional Ramadan pilgrimage. Karzai added that the next meeting in Saudi Arabia will be during the Haj.

13. (C) Karzai told the French that the Taliban had set no conditions other than guarantees of safety for themselves and their families. He said Pakistan opposition leader Nawaz Sharif had not participated in the talks. According to the French Ambassador, Karzai did not otherwise discuss the content or structure of the talks, except to indicate that the officials and the mullahs had engaged in separate tracks.

(New German Ambassador Werner Lauk reported that this briefing was virtually the same one he received from Karzai.)

14. (C) The French Ambassador also noted that Karzai asked that President Sarkozy weigh in with King Abdullah to encourage the Saudis' engagement in this effort. Reconciliation with the Taliban would be a lengthy process, said Karzai, and the Saudis were inclined to move slowly.

RECONCILIATION EFFORT OR POLITICAL THEATER?

15. (C) The U.S., British and French Ambassadors questioned the depth of both Afghan and Saudi commitment to this process. According to Ponton d'Amecourt, the Saudis told the French that King Abdullah did not want to associate himself too closely with the Taliban talks. The Ambassadors also agreed the high-profile media coverage, including public comments by Qayum Karzai, undermined the idea that these are serious negotiations. British Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Cowles commented there was likely "less than meets the eye" to the Saudi talks, that serious peace negotiations would be held secretly. He speculated that Karzai's motives in pushing the talks might have more to do with building his pre-election political base than advancing reconciliation.

16. (C) Ambassador Wood pointed out that Karzai appeared more enthusiastic about cultivating direct ties to Saudi Arabia and the royal family than promoting reconciliation. Karzai had also expressed interest in exploring how Saudi influence could "restrain" Pakistan.

GERMAN AMBASSADOR: RECONCILIATION MUST START SOMEWHERE

17. (C) The German Ambassador suggested the Saudi talks could potentially form the basis of successful reconciliation. He argued that "80 percent of the Taliban just want decent lives" and to return to mainstream society. Saudi Arabia had the credibility to bring them to the negotiating table. He agreed the current high-profile push might be motivated by

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political competition between the Northern Alliance and Karzai camps, but said that, at the moment, "there is no other way forward." While skeptical of progress in the near term, the British Ambassador agreed the Saudi channel should be kept open as the participants were likely the same ones who would one day engage in meaningful reconciliation negotiations.

U.S. WILL NEITHER SUPPORT NOR OPPOSE

18. (C) The French Ambassador asked the other Ambassadors for their positions; did they feel they could support the Saudi talks in principle? Ambassador Wood said there was too little information for the U.S. to endorse the process now, but that did not mean the U.S. was opposed either - only that more information is needed to develop an informed position. The British Ambassador agreed, adding his concern that Karzai might "give away the store" based on political motivations.

SAUDI PROCESS SHOULD BE VIEWED WITH SKEPTICISM - FOR NOW

19. (C) The Ambassadors agreed too little was known about the talks in Saudi to merit support of the process at this time. The French Ambassador confided that he appreciated the points of caution and skepticism supplied by the other Ambassadors, saying they would lend support to his own guidance to Paris. (The clear implication was that the French government is leaning forward in terms of supporting the Saudi process.) The British Ambassador made a similar comment, noting that on occasion he needed to moderate Foreign Secretary Miliband's enthusiasm.

WOOD